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**Empathy for Empathy’s Sake:  
Aesthetics and Everyday Empathic Sadism**

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“I started groping around in front of me, like a blind guy, but without getting up or anything. I kept saying, “Mother darling, why won’t you give me your *hand*?” I was only horsing around, naturally. That stuff gives me a bang sometimes. Besides, I know it annoyed hell out of old Ackley. He always brought out the old sadist in me. I was pretty sadistic with him quite often.”

J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

**Abstract.** This article examines an aberration of empathy that shows a morally problematic aspect of empathy. The examination focuses on a form of behavior that will be described as empathy for empathy’s sake. This empathy for empathy’s sake enables many forms of aesthetic experiences, ranging from the sublime to enjoyment of tragedies. It also can be a feature of everyday life in what will be called empathic

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<sup>1</sup> This article has profited immensely from the commentaries by Eva-Maria Engelen, Andrew Hamilton, and Kevin Houser. Their formulations and ideas have found their way into this article at numerous instances. A grant by the Tempelton Foundation supported the work on this article.

sadism: when one manipulates others to predict and simulate their (usually negative) inner state, ranging from teasing to actual pain infliction.

## 1. Empathy as a Moral Practice

Jesse Prinz, in a recent article called “Against Empathy,” discusses many cases of the “dark side of empathy” that show how empathy may lead to an unfair judgment and may favor some at the expense of others (Prinz 2011). The problem with empathy, Prinz holds, is that empathy interferes with morality due to its “intrinsic partiality” and ‘ineluctable locality.’<sup>2</sup>

While I agree with Prinz in this assessment, I disagree with his conclusion. Let’s begin with the agreement. An aggravation of these unfair distributions of empathy that Prinz only touches upon can be found in the possibility of the misuse of empathy to justify criminals. Even the criminal would evoke positive feelings when he stands on the gallows, as Adam Smith suggested (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759). Empathy and side-taking enforce and strengthen each other until any position can seem justified, including those that are morally wrong. One can always have empathy, even with the bad guy, and find reasons to support someone via a feed-back loop of side-taking. In these cases, empathy reduces the ambiguity or “grayness” of a conflict and turns it into a black-and-white picture. This does not mean, however, that the one who empathizes will necessarily make the better choice. Empathy can justify either side of a conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> The main problem of Prinz’s argument is that he reduces empathy to shared feelings. Thereby he rules out the more intellectual component of empathy: to *understand* the feelings *and situations* of others. And he neglects the important case where the empathizer feels with someone who does not even understand or react to his or her own situation. Once one reduces empathy to shared feelings and suggests that these shared feelings need to account for all ethics, then indeed empathy cannot live up to the expectations.

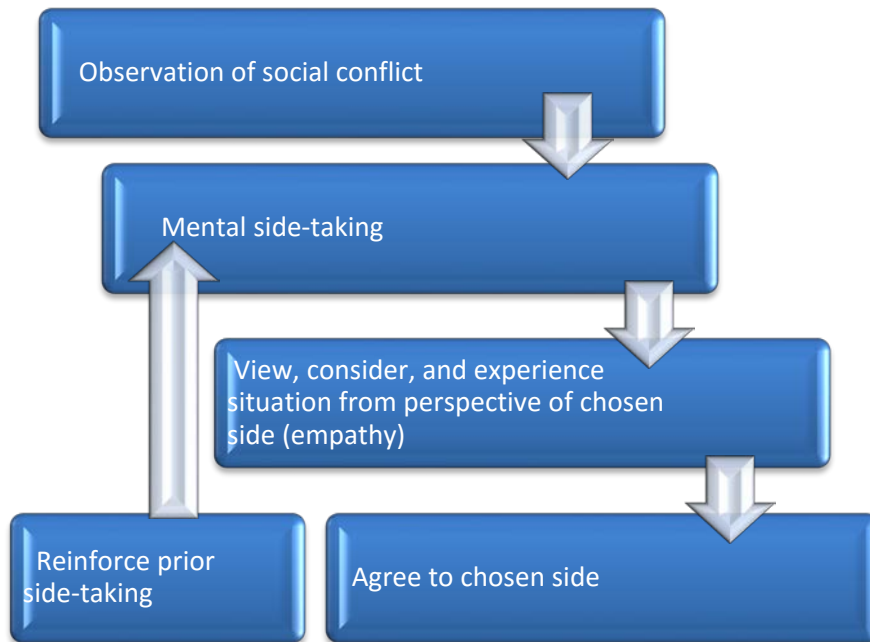


Figure 1. The core model of three-person empathy takes its start from the observation of a social conflict and a mental side-taking, which is reinforced through empathy. (Breithaupt, 2012b)

Still, this should not lead one to be “against empathy.” This is only a problem if one holds the--mistaken, I believe--view that the empathizer always chooses the right side. Empathy appears to be ethically problematic, as Prinz suggests, if one makes the claim that all morals must be based on empathy, in which case empathy’s partiality would be a problem. Few, if any, hold this view. If, however, one makes the more logical claim that empathy supports sociability and that sociability is deeply interwoven with moral behavior, one can begin to see the moral impact of empathy. If one assumes that empathy is first of all a tool to relate to and understand others,

one can understand its positive, but also its negative moral effects and uses more clearly.

This article will not develop the positive sides of empathy, which have often been described (Halpern 2001, Tomasello 1999). Instead, this article will develop one morally negative effect of empathy. The article will approach the dark sides of empathy not by considering fairness, as Prinz does, but by examining those morally bad acts that are committed or desired *in order to* experience empathy.

## 2. Empathy and the Dangers of Empathy

On the one hand, we know much more about empathy than 20 years ago. Researchers have made many inroads toward understanding our capacity to empathize. Several core mechanisms have been suggested to account for various aspects of empathy, such as the Perception Action model that proposes that the brains of someone executing an action (or experiencing an affect) and an observer of that action utilize similar neural routines (Decety 2006; Singer & Lamm 2009). Neurologically, the mirror neurons have revealed a remarkable aptitude for simulation (Gallese, 2001; Fogassi et al. 2005). On the level of empathy-related skills, we know more about mimicking and Theory of Mind (Lamm, Batson & Decety 2009) than before. Furthermore, we have gained insights into how empathy operates from studying the diversity of abilities and inabilities, from autism (Beaumont & Newcombe 2006; Southgate & Hamilton 2008) to psychopathy (Harenski, Harenski, Shane & Kiehl 2010). It is possible to distinguish among different notions of empathy; see especially Batson's distinction of eight different phenomena that are all called empathy<sup>3</sup> (Batson 2009; see also Leiberg & Anders 2006; Thompson 2001). Furthermore, we can distinguish how the observation of either sensorimotor pain

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<sup>3</sup> Batson suggests that the concepts of empathy respond to two distinct questions: "How can one know what another person is thinking and feeling? What leads one person to respond with sensitivity and care to suffering of another?" The distinction between these two modes of empathy, namely knowledge and care/sensibility, does not in itself imply that there is a transition from the first to the other but it raises the question of whether they may lead to each other.

(observing another's bodily injury) or affective pain (the another's emotional reaction) each can trigger vicarious experience/empathy (Vignemont & Jacob 2012). Work is also beginning on the question to which degree empathy requires prior "semantization of emotional processes," that is a complex and culturally diverse matching of emotional processes with names (Engelen 2012: 41).

On the other hand, however, we have not come much further in understanding when and why our capacity to empathize is turned on or off or when a core mechanism, such as Perception Action couplings, leads from a neurological levels of simulation to awareness, consciousness, and distinct empathic action, such as helping others. The mere fact that we have the ability to engage in mind-reading or of empathic caring, for example, does not explain how and when we engage in these practices and when not.

This article will suggest, by means of examples, that different experiences of empathy may involve a process in which several distinct facets of empathy with different self- and other-related forms of experience are evoked sequentially. Part of such a process or sequence can be the judgment of others. A study by Tania Singer et al. has established that observers, especially male observers, experience less empathy when they attribute moral wrongdoing to the observed (Singer, Seymour, O'Doherty, Stephan, Dolan & Frith 2006). This is more than an issue of social context or cultural diversity. It shapes the nature of empathy. If empathy is determined by particular stimuli—or negatively by blockers—then these stimuli, triggers, and inhibitors must be considered as part of the architecture of empathy.

Suzanne Keen has made a remarkable suggestion in this respect. She suggests that there is a reason why we engage in empathy more easily in the domain of fiction. We slip into the shoes of literary characters easily because there are few costs and risks associated with it (Keen, 2007, 2010). In her playful experiment, students were more likely to feel for the character in a work of fiction than for a supposedly real person writing an email or a hand-written letter with a plea for help. She suggests that because empathy binds us and we are cautious to engage in it, we limit it to few situations or to domains of fiction. Fiction is safe(r), since the character will not turn around and ask us for money.

This suggestion raises the question of the costs of empathy—and hence the potential downsides of empathy. From an evolutionary standpoint, of course, there are large costs associated with the development of a brain that is able to process something as complex as empathy (Dunbar 1992). However, there are also costs and risks that arise after acquiring the capacity and ability for empathy. These include the

feared obligations one may experience when someone asks for help, as Keen's experiment suggests. These obligations indicate an imaginary alliance that limit the independence of the individual and thereby bind him or her.

An aggravation of this effect is self-loss. Whoever "empathizes" or "identifies" with someone else may, at least to some extent, also slip out of her own shoes, so to speak, and lose her own interests and identity for at least some time (see Breithaupt 2009). This self-loss can be pleasurable and enriching, as in the case of fiction, but it can also be bordering on the psychotic as in the case of Stockholm Syndrome or Hostage Identification Crisis (Regner 2000, Carver 2007). Hence, the abilities of blocking of empathy—the topic of this volume—needs to be considered alongside the positive instance of empathy.

Following this architecture of empathy and its dangers, the threshold of where "empathy" begins could be marked by where the danger of self-loss emerges. In response to this danger, the blocking of empathy appears as a prime strategy to protect the self. This article will examine a second strategy. This strategy or practice is one in which empathy is admitted but does not lead to caring for the other. It is a strategy in which the experience of empathy is linked to a return to the self.

### **3. Aesthetics of Empathy**

In the history of aesthetics and in the theory of tragedy in particular, one issue is often raised and usually immediately dismissed, which is that the spectator somehow desires the misfortune of the protagonist, in order to feel elevated or purified by these big feelings. Edmund Burke, for example, famously notices the joy in the pain of others, and he immediately finds a pro-social reason for this odd form of joy:

I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and not a small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others [...].

If this passion would be simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion [...].

And as our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy [...].

[...] it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any immanent hazard before I can take a delight in the sufferings of others, real or imaginary [...]

(Burke, 1958/1757: 45-48).

Now, I would like to pause here and take this assertion that the pain of the other pleases us seriously without immediately buying into Burke's teleology of pro-sociality. Do tragedies indeed *foster* the wish for misfortune of the hero? Or do they merely *imply* the misfortune while teaching us to pity with the hero?

The difference is neither trivial, nor simple to draw out. The later option, to be sure, seems to be the one favored by most theories of tragedies of the long eighteenth century. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing asserts that tragedies teach pity (*Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 1767-69). Nevertheless, it is indeed obvious that it is the misfortune of the hero that brings about emotions, feelings, or thoughts in the spectator that seem to be somehow desirable and to be the very point of tragedy. But this tells us whether empathizing is the end for which tragedy is a means. If it were, that would mean that tragedy is a particularly potent dose of feeling to revel in, without regard to the content, and, in this sense, without regard for the content of the hero's fate. In this sense, the experience of engagement would become an end, untethered to that of the hero's. Jean-Jacques Rousseau held such a position when he discusses and dismisses tragedy (see *Lettre a M. d'Alembert sur les Spectacles*, 1758).

The question remains whether the tragic arousal is focused around the self or the other. Of course, as Keen might point out (Keen 2007), the very point of fiction is that the difference is disabled. We have fiction, one could overstate this point, in order to enjoy empathy void of any obligation. Still, self-loss could occur even in fiction.

There is one element of the spectator's engagement in tragedies that needs to be stressed: One feels for the hero from the position of his or her tragic destiny. Hence, it could be suggested in our vocabulary that it is the anticipation of the hero's bad fate that gets one involved in the first place, that makes one empathize, identify, participate, and feel compassion. If this is true, the anticipated bad fate of the hero triggers the spectator's empathy. One could argue that the typical spectator of a tragedy sides and empathizes with the one for whom we fear for moral reasons. However, not all tragic heroes are particularly morally attractive. There is another possibility that stems from the mechanics of empathy. Tragedies offer a fairly risk-free involvement with the character since they promise both access to and escape from the character: After some strongly-felt emotions of pity, the spectators are released when the character tragically falls apart.

The attraction of this return ticket becomes clear in the context of the above-described dangers of commitment and self-loss. As a consequence of these dangers, we learn to use our empathy selectively and prefer to empathize when we know that we will "return" to ourselves after a short empathic involvement. Hence, narratives and tragic narratives in particular are especially suited for empathy since we know

they will come to an end; we can anticipate our release after some sequence of events, which is the tragic climax. There will be strong emotions, but they will come to an end with the character, so that the spectator is cathartically cleansed of the character, as Aristotle expounded, and can return to herself. A case in point is Aeschylus' *The Persians*, where the Greek audience's knowledge of history lets them "safely" cheer for their archenemy.

Of course, traditional readings of aesthetics admit that the bad fate is necessary, but they seem to have the position that the spectator does not desire the hero's bad fate, but rather desires only the emotions and reflections that the hero's bad fate causes in the spectator. However, it seems likely that the spectator's desire includes all prior segments that enable his or her emotional involvement and empathy: desired is empathy as such, and not necessarily the salvation of the hero.

In short, the question is whether empathy is a means in itself or can become one. If it is, then, the involvement of spectators in tragedies would be an ideal form of this empathy for empathy's sake.

#### **4. Empathic Sadism**

This empathy for empathy's sake is not limited to aesthetics and aesthetic theory. There seem to be a variety of physically, emotionally or mentally harmful acts that are committed *in order to* feel empathy. Those tend to be cases in which the suffering of the victim allows the perpetrator or some third party to empathize.

There is a range of actions that fall under this description.

1) *Retributive pain empathy*. There are acts committed out of vengeance and the desire for retribution. The punisher wants to inflict pain on someone and he or she wants to feel the pain of the other as a means to get back at the other for some prior acts. In a more abstracted way this seems still to be an essential aspect of the penal code of law. Knowing that someone finds justice behind bars, on the gallows, or by being singled out in court may still carry the emotional knowledge of the criminal's pain. Even if one directly identifies with the victim of an aggression, it may be via the perspective of the victim that one empathizes with the pain of the punished perpetrator to find some enjoyment in this very pain. The desire to witness the pain



of the perpetrator is a commonly-cited motivation for family members who watch an execution in the United States (Madeira 2012).

One could object that the observing of the pain of the punished individual does not involve a simulation and vicarious experience but just some “cold” attribution of the pain in the other. Nevertheless, I suggest that even this pain recognition in the case of retribution might be best explained as a process that begins with some vicarious experience that is then redirected to some other feeling. More precisely, the satisfaction of seeing justice served may be the result of a transformation of other-focused empathy into self-gratification.

2) *Direct sadism with pain participation.* Sadism consists of wanting to inflict pain on the other or to watch the pain of the other (perhaps in order to sense his superiority but perhaps for other reasons). To accomplish this, the sadist also needs to at least recognize the pain of the other. There is debate over whether people with strong sadistic tendencies are capable of empathy or rather suffer from the lack of empathy. The dominant view, supported by fMRI evidence, is that psychopaths lack empathy entirely (Holt & Meloy 1999, Kiehl & Hoffman 2011). Nevertheless, we also know that some psychopaths are gifted manipulators and appear to be good in mind reading and Theory of Mind. They just do not care for the wellbeing of others and apparently do not simulate the emotions of the other in their system (Harenski, Harenski, Shane & Kiehl 2010). Still, it seems likely that the sadistic psychopath recognizes that the other is in pain and enjoys the other’s pain. Why else would he even bother to inflict the pain otherwise? Hence, instead of simply saying that psychopaths lack empathy entirely, it may be more precise to say that psychopaths lack—or block—vicarious experiences and instead use a self-focused way of mind-reading the other’s emotions that allows them to derive pleasure from this activity. Perhaps the differentiations between different forms of off-line vicarious experience need to be considered (along the lines of Vignemont & Jacob, 2012)

Of course, not all sadists are psychopaths. In fact, I want to suggest in the following that some small dose of an *empathic sadism* is part of everyday culture.

3) *Manipulative predictive empathy.* There is the “aesthetic” attitude in everyday life when someone “tunes in more” to others in certain situation and thus aims to bring about and emulate those situations and scenarios. This can be situations of suffering, negative emotions, embarrassment, being criticized, feelings of inferiority, or shame, but also includes positive feelings, ranging from joy when we receive a gift or receive good news to learning situations where the observer is happy about the experience of an insight of the learner. This aesthetic attitude may be quite subtle and may consist in a mere teasing of others, a probing or testing of others to

provoke a predictable emotional reaction. Cinderella's stepmother may well experience such an emotion when she spills the peas and the rice and orders Cinderella to sort the seeds, well knowing that this will derail her wish to attend the ball. Cinderella's stepmother may not merely want to forbid Cinderella to attend the ball (she could have done this more simply), but she wants to cause an emotional reaction in her when she understands the impossibility of solving the pea-sorting task in a timely fashion. The emphasis may not be on predicting the precise emotion or affect of the other, but the recognition and expectation *that* the other will emotionally react to the manipulation.

Obviously, these three cases are quite different, while also overlapping insofar as they all involve some induced restriction, ranging from direct pain to emotional embarrassment of the others as a key to understanding and participating in the feelings of the restricted other. One could point out here that in the first two cases of retributive pain empathy and direct sadism, empathy is only the means for some other goal, namely assuring that one gets even with the other or the feeling of superiority. Only the third case of manipulative predictive empathy in its "aesthetic" attitude presents something closer to empathy for empathy's sake. Still, in all three cases some form of empathy is the goal of the manipulating actions even if this empathy serves another secondary goal, such as vengeance. And in all three cases, empathy leads to a self-centered empowerment of the empathizer by granting him the privilege of knowing and perhaps controlling the emotions of the other. In this sense, the "empathy for empathy's sake" could also be described with a different emphasis as "empathy as a means of self-empowerment."

This is what I would like to describe as empathic sadism. Empathic sadism I call those manipulations of others that allow one to predict or anticipate their feelings so that one finds it easier to empathize with them, which allows for an enjoyment independent of whether we "care" for the other and wish them well. The emphasis of this prediction or anticipation ranges from knowing *that* the other will have an emotional reaction to a precise estimation *what* exactly he or she will feel. And depending on this prediction, the enjoyment of the empathizer ranges from a sense of self-empowerment, since one can control the other's emotion, to a more intellectual satisfaction to having correctly predicted the other's reaction. In both cases, the enjoyment of the other's pain is self-focused. This also includes the joy of watching others in predicament when we do not actively bring about these manipulations but just contemplate them. It also holds for reading fiction when the situations of the characters allow us to recognize that and how they will emotionally react.

As indicated, these manipulations also extend to positive feelings. In the case of positive feelings, it seems more proper to speak of an empathic manipulation instead of empathic sadism. Both share a core structure of manipulating others in such a way that their feelings become predictable and therefore accessible for empathy, which one can subsequently enjoy. (This could account for the partially egotistic nature of gift-giving).

In all three cases, we can also observe that while empathy is central, this empathy does not lead to active compassion, since this would involve stopping the cause of the suffering. In other words, empathy is indeed enabled together with a consequent blocking or limiting of some aspect of empathy. At first glance, this sounds paradoxical. The target of empathic sadism is to trigger empathy only to then block this very empathy? However, as outlined above, empathy seems to bear with it the risk of self-loss or over-investment. Hence, the admission of empathy and its suppression or blocking has the effect of limiting empathy and hence also the self-loss associated with empathy. Hence, these elaborations suggest that at least in these cases empathy appears to be a process of several stages and not classifiable simply as a one-step phenomenon. The culminating point in this process is the empathizer's celebration over his or her mastery over the other's emotions. Arthur Schopenhauer and especially Friedrich Nietzsche express similar views about the joy of domination others (see, for example, *Morgenröte, Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile*, 1881, § 113).

I owe the following elaboration and in fact extension to Kevin Houser: "This reminds me of surfing—though in this case emotional surfing; one seeks waves of feeling, paddles out to ride them, and the hope one escapes. And 'empathy-surfers' will try to create the very waves they hope to ride—as people create drama so that they can 'draft' and 'tack' the breezes and disturbances they themselves have created. And they can use these emotions to move without the same danger of being moved by them. The idea is that riding other's emotions is, safer for the self. One has emotions, but has them 'once-removed.'"<sup>4</sup>

Blakey Vermeule similarly speaks of the way how readers relate to characters as "going along for a ride" (Vermeule, 2007: 43). Her point is that readers are usually not simply identifying with one character, but that they follow them both from within

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<sup>4</sup> This essay was written parallel to the essay by Kevin Houser (Houser 2011). In this piece, Houser describes an ethically preferable attitude to empathy and sketches a normative mechanism for generating acknowledgment in proximity to Stanley Cavell.

and from above at the same time. Readers know more than the character, but they simultaneously participate in the feelings and more limited perspective of the character.

## **5. Stages of Empathic Sadism**

Empathic sadism, like other social emotions, is certainly acquired and learned. Of course, we know little about how this learning occurs, but we may propose that it is linked to the feeling of self-mastery and superiority. This is a possible sequence for the acquisition of empathic sadism:

- 1) On person traps or manipulates another person.
- 2) This makes the other's emotional reaction to his or her situation predictable for the manipulator.
- 3) The predictability and misery of the other simplify/allow/trigger empathy.
- 4) Manipulator shares the emotions, including pain, of the other.
- 5) Manipulator blocks the shared pain.
- 6) Manipulator gets joy out of either: 1), 2), 3), 4), 5) or some combination of these. One could speak of "empathic sadism" only if the joy stems from 2)-5).

Here is a more concrete case: Three siblings, A, B, and C are playing. Things are getting a bit rough. And one starts to pin down another one the couch so that the second cannot get up any longer. Now it seems to me that there are three distinct pleasures that the dominant child can get out of this.

The youngest child C might simply enjoy the domination of overcoming an older and stronger sibling: "I am so strong!" This would correspond to step 1). It does not require empathy, though it can and probably does include an understanding that the dominated child suffers. However, the enjoyment may not have to be linked to sharing the suffering.

The second child B might enjoy dominating the weaker child C. Since B can be expected to be stronger, it seems less likely that domination alone is the reward. Instead, child B might enjoy the predictability of C's emotional behavior (as in step 2). Child B learns that one can manipulate both the physical *and* the emotional state of others: "I can cause strong emotions in you!" and: "I am smart since I know how you are feeling when I do this to you!" Child B might stop the act of suppression once this behavior leads to shared emotions (as in step 4).

The oldest child A might enjoy dominating her siblings. She has already learned the lesson of B and has learned to predict and empathize with her siblings. But she nevertheless engages in the game. A might take enjoyment out of the fact that she can control her emotional involvement, that is, that she can empathize and block empathy at will, step 5: "I feel your pain, but it does not move me." Still, one can expect a rather controlled form of dosing the pain to the other. Child A turns the domination partly inward as a form of self-control and thus self-empowerment.

Elements of this everyday practice of empathic sadism include: embarrassing and shaming, disappointing, criticizing, teasing, testing whether we have the power to shame others, putting pressure on students in learning situations, moralizing, mistreatment by subordinates in the work place, sexual domination, being devil's advocate in moral situations, etc., often in quite subtle forms, such as irony. Thomas Mann's narrator in *The Buddenbrooks* seems to understand this everyday sadism of empathy quite well, when he addresses Tony as "die arme Tony" before narrating her suffering from the feeling of a socially inadequate marriage.

## **6. Cultures of empathy**

It is common among researchers of empathy to separate emotional-simulation-based forms of empathy from cognitive mind-reading forms of empathy. This conceptual differentiation might lead some to suggest that the term "empathy" is an overly vague concept used inappropriately to describe separate things. Here I disagree. The conceptual clarity of Batson's concepts (Batson 2009), for example, should not mislead one to assume that we have functionally and practically eight fully separate forms of empathy. Instead, the differentiation allows one to understand how different aspects of empathy can be put into the service of another. In the case of this article, one of these cases is the way that emotional simulation is put into the service of

cognitive understanding of the other's feelings: By manipulating a situation (physical pain, psychological stress or discomfort, etc.), one can predict his or her emotions. And then one can even emotionally enjoy this knowledge. In this case, an emotional simulation of a negative feeling triggers an intellectual understanding, which then triggers a positive feeling. Hence, this article supports the view that even the seemingly separate aspects of "cold" and "hot" empathy often come together as cultural practices.

Through the combination of these facets, empathy can serve many purposes, including social control over others and taking enjoyment out of their pain. To be sure, even and perhaps especially in these cultural practices of empathy, social bonding emerges.

This way of building culture by means of sadistic empathy or empathy for empathy's sake seems to be a human specialty. Non-human animals certainly have many ways to establish hierarchies and domination. However, it is unclear whether the empathic feeling of the suffering of the inferior animal is a goal of establishing domination. However, human beings seem to excel in this ability. It may be because of this empathic sadism that we indeed can say that man is the empathic being (as Michael Tomasello and others have suggested, see Tomasello 1999).

Empathy certainly is one of the key bonds of society. Still, the aim of this article has been to suggest that empathy is not a sugar-coated method of happy community-building. The objections to such a vision came from two sides. First, empathy is not only a means of social appreciation, but also negotiates competition and negative feelings toward others. And second, empathy can use empathy-related feelings for others as selfish means, which I called empathy for empathy's sake. Still, positive-natured people might suggest that even this potentially sadistic empathy for empathy's sake or self-empowerment by means of empathy is a vehicle for training socially positive empathy and finding enjoyment in empathy, which cannot but further social bonding in the end, as already Edmund Burke suggested. There is nothing in this article that would contradict such a vision.

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